

HAITIAN ART HISTORY

2010 Haitian Art Factory

Haitian art, highly regarded and appreciated by collectors and viewers alike, began to set its roots fairly early after it became an independent republic in 1804. There is evidence that beginning in 1807, King Henri Cristophe was promoting artistic endeavors. A few decades later, between 1830 and 1860 many Haitian artists headed to France for formal education and returned to Haiti to work in an artistic capacity in the island's biggest cities, Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haïtien. During the 1840s, Emperor Faustin-Elie Soulouque created the Imperial Academy of Drawing and Painting in Port-au-Prince. In the mid-1860s, his successor, President Fabre-Nicholas Geffrard created the short-lived Academy of Art. In 1880, artist Archibald Lochard founded an academy for painting and sculpture.

The best known of these "founding fathers" stories remains however, that of the *Art Center* in Port-au-Prince. In 1943, an American man named Dewitt Peters traveled to Haiti as an English teacher. An artist himself, he arrived and sensed a lack of focus and devotion to art on the island, so he helped create an arts department at Horace Ashton's Haitian-American Institute. Less than a year later in May of 1944, the *Art Center* opened its doors to the public. Although Peters' name is most heavily associated with the creation of the *Centre d'Art*, we mustn't leave out the names of the other founders: artist Maurice Borno, artist, sculptor and the Center's first Secretary General; Albert Mangonès; Raymond Conpeau, artist and the Center's first Treasurer; Géo Remponeau, artist, Assistant Secretary and creator of the Center's magazine *Studio No.3*; Gérald Bloncourt; Raymond Lavelanette; and poet and novelist Philippe Thoby Marcelin. The *Art Center* was unarguably the most important factor in establishing structure in the world of Haitian art.

Thanks in great part to the establishment of the Center, Haitian art also began to benefit from outside appreciation and outside interaction. Famous French critic and key figure of the Surrealist art movement André Breton visited Haiti in 1945 and bought several Hector Hyppolite paintings. Well known Cuban painter Wilfredo Lam exhibited his work at the Center to much praise and fanfare. The Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased a Wilson Bigaud painting around 1949, "Murder in the Jungle." Haitian painter Antonio Joseph became the first Haitian artist ever to be given a Guggenheim Award. The *Art Center* was a tangible two-way avenue for this birth in art awareness, as it gave artists a means to display their work, and viewers, buyers and critics a way to come into contact with the work in the first place.

Haitian art began to take its rightful place on the world stage. Since this happened, artists have gained the confidence to follow their own paths and seek responses to their own questions through art. New schools and movements in art have since emerged, and the world watches with anticipation as Haiti's artists continue this tradition of excellence in the arts.

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